

# Laurie Hession

*Clarrie Neal*

*Compiled from information and photographs provided by Laurie Hession.*

Laurence Vincent Hession is a well known identity of the Box Hill - Nelson area. His involvement in the community, his hobbies of family research and his scrapbooks, have enabled him to build up an incredible historical collection of the area and its people.

Laurie's Australian story began when his great grandfather Thomas Hession and his wife Bridget, arrived in Australia as assisted migrants aboard the *Queen Victoria* in 1841. They were natives of Tuam in County Galway.

After settling at Pitt Town for a few years they moved in the mid 1850s to Nelson and became one of the pioneering families of that district. Thomas had bought 30 acres in 1854 and then purchased another 50 acres in 1856; it was on this site he built his ironbark slab home that still stands today. Another two property purchases in later years built the total family holding to 134 acres.

The second of the five generations of Hession family homes that stand on the property was built by Laurie's grandfather Thomas in the 1890s. His parents, Vince and Annie Hession were to build their home, the third on the site in 1921.

Laurie was born on the 2nd December 1923, the eldest of three children to Vince Hession and his wife Mary Anne Stenland. Though not many families lived in the area and playmates were few, he still has fond memories of his childhood days. He recalled making his own toys, using scrap boards to build a truck, and using boot polish tins for the wheels; and also going to his cousin Frank's place to play with his meccano set. When other children were there, they played chasings, shop, hide and seek in the field of oats, and made their own billycarts.

As a five year old he remembers the day in 1928 when Kingsford-Smith after leaving Richmond aerodrome, flew very low over the surrounding countryside on his way to New Zealand. He said his father was standing on the fence to get a good look at the plane, a very rare sight in those days.

No swimming pools in those days, so swimming on the hot summer days was in the farm dam or in the waterholes of the local creek. Christmas was a time of great excitement, in the Christmas stocking would be a bottle of Noons' soft drink and a brown paper bag of lollies.

He was often told by his mother of the day, when as a babe in her arms, they were travelling into Riverstone in the family's horse and sulky. The horse reared up when it shied at something on the track tipping Laurie and his mother out, his father who had stayed in the sulky looked down and politely asked "What are you doing down there, Mum?" His father bought the family's first car in c1934, an Erskine sedan.

Laurie commenced school at the age of seven at the Rouse Hill School located on the Windsor Road. This meant a walk of more than four km to get there, then another four km walk in the afternoon to get home. He started the walk of a morning with Edna Mason and Lillian Lester and on the way they would meet up with other children from the Box Hill area.

They would walk along dusty roads and tracks and across paddocks. Sometimes grazing in the paddocks would be a bull and Laurie said "we would always keep a close eye on them".

Sometimes on hot summer days on their way home from school they would stop at Miss Roberts' place on Nelson Road for a cold drink from the tank and a feed of loquats from her tree. He remembers the days they would run most of the way home to beat the oncoming summer storms.

Rouse Hill was a one teacher school with about 30 pupils. Mr Brereton was the teacher, his wife taught sewing, and Nina Terry (nee Rouse) gave the children their singing lessons. Though Mr Brereton wielded the cane when necessary, his usual form of punishment was to make the pupil stand on his form or on his desk, much to the amusement of the class.

As a schoolboy, Laurie had the jobs at home of picking up the sticks and bark for kindling for the fuel stove (no electricity supplies in those days). Another job was to pick up and clean eggs and he learnt how to milk the family cow at an early age. Laurie never had the opportunity to attend any secondary schools.

He recalls his mother cooking over the open fire or on the fuel stove. As with many other families, Monday was wash day, with all the clothes going into a boiler or kerosene tin on an open fire. He remembers how happy his mother was when she had the bricked in wood fired copper boiler built. No water supply or hot water service meant that Saturday was bath day, and through the week a face and hand wash would suffice.

After tea there would be the games of Ludo, draughts, snakes and ladders, dominoes, and as they got older they learnt the card games of euchre, five hundred and crib, all played by the light of a kerosene lamp. Empire Day was celebrated on the 24th May, usually with a bonfire and crackers and held in the paddock at the Willock's home in Blind Road.

As teenagers they would go walking across the paddocks towards Maraylya, shooting rabbits, hares and foxes. They would often ride their pushbikes to Broadwater, near Cattai to go fishing. On Saturday nights they would ride their bikes to Windsor to attend the 'flicks'.

Being a farming family the Depression of the 1930s had a minimal effect on them, but Laurie does recall the swaggies, men willing for work of any kind, just to get a feed. One was a regular visitor who was always looking to sharpen farming tools, scissors, saws, etc. Another was known as the 'peapicker' because his first enquiry was "are there any peas to pick".

Laurie worked on his parents' poultry farm for nothing other than his meals and his keep until he was 20 years old. He well remembers when he returned home from the Army his father saying "Well! I suppose it is about time I started paying you a wage".

He also worked casually at Ted Terry's vegetable farm on Cattai Creek, riding his pushbike three miles along a sandy track to get there. He would be picking melons, cabbages, spuds, etc. for 6 shillings a half day, later he was to earn 10 shillings a half day.

On the 14th January 1939 the district experienced the worst bushfires in its history, with two men losing their lives, several homes destroyed, as well as the loss of fencing, livestock and poultry. Laurie had this to say about the fire -

*With a temperature of 47 degrees and a westerly wind gusting at 60 mph the fire started at the Jack and Jill picnic ground at Vineyard where a man was burning out a stump. The fire spread quickly through Box Hill and Nelson and then burnt through to Castle Hill. I remember running with buckets of water, dousing a 10 ft high privet hedge we had on the south western side of our home.*

*It had been a very dry period and all the vegetation was tinder dry, fortunately our home did not catch alight, but there were many anxious moments until the fire passed, a day I still recall quite vividly. This fire followed a smaller fire the previous month in the Blind Road area, but this second fire was to burn out that area again.*

*A southerly change that blew up that evening caused smouldering trees and stumps to burst into flames, showering sparks all around, the burnt bush resembling a fairyland scene - a day I will never forget."*

Laurie received his call up notice for the Army in April, 1942 and reported to the Richmond drill hall where he was drafted into the Medical Corps of the Army. He did his initial training at the bases at Cowra, Wagga, Sydney showground, and at Liverpool. On the 21st December 1942 he and 12 other Medical Corps staff embarked on the converted troop carrier *Katoomba* bound for New Guinea.

A note in Laurie's note book diary reads - "*Xmas dinner in 1942 aboard the Katoomba consisted of a small piece of bully beef, a smaller piece of fatty meat, a small potato, and a cup of water.*"

They arrived in Port Moresby on the 3rd January as reinforcements for the 3rd Field Ambulance Unit, later they were to erect the 2/5th Australian General Hospital on the outskirts of Port Moresby. He recalled the many night air raids there and loading the hospital ship *Centaur* with wounded soldiers bound for Sydney. A month later on its return trip from Sydney it was sunk off Brisbane with the loss of 299 lives, there being only 64 survivors.

Laurie left New Guinea on the 12th December 1943 and returned home to work on his parents' poultry farm. Later in 1945 he bought his first car, a 1927 Chevrolet Capitol Tourer that cost 80 pounds. Eight years later he sold this car for 100 pounds.

Laurie met Daphne Nellie Vaughan, a girl from Pitt Town, in 1945 and they were married in the historic St. Matthew's Catholic Church at Windsor on the 28th October 1950. In 1949 he commenced making cement blocks to build his home; he was to make 11,000 of them and the house was built in 1950. Here they raised their children - Michael, Maureen, John and Helen.

In the 1950s while helping his father on his poultry farm, Laurie started to build his own poultry farm. He recalled it as a very busy period of his life that often meant working a 70 hour week.

After the disastrous bushfires of 1939 it was decided to form a Bush Fire Brigade for the Box Hill - Nelson area. The brigade was formed on the 27th January 1940 with Laurie being one of the founding members and over the years he has held many committee positions. He was President from 1950 to 1970, Brigade Captain from 1971 to 1986, and was again elected President in 1990, a position he still holds.

He was a founding member of the Box Hill-Nelson Progress Association when it was formed on the 12th April 1944 and has held the positions of Vice President and President for many years. The year 2000 still sees Laurie an active member.

Besides being a good committee member of these organisations Laurie was also an active 'hands on' member, helping build the brigade's first water tanker and also the original hall for the Progress Association.

He was an original member of the Riverstone Conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society when it was formed on the 3rd April 1949. He was their first Treasurer, a position he held for 17 years and followed this as Secretary for a similar period, retiring in 1995.

He has always taken an active part in the affairs of St. John's Catholic Church at Riverstone, managing the weekly envelope giving scheme with the help of such people John O'Hanlon, Norm Hession and Norma Saunders. He helped build the tennis court at St. John's for the Catholic Younger Set, of which he was a member. He also helped build the first class room for the school and has participated in many working bees over the years.

In 1975 Laurie started collecting bottles. The collection is now housed in a large shed he built at the side of his house. Collecting bottles led to him collecting items of historical interest, and with his many friends and relatives giving him items he had to increase the size of the museum. Laurie commenced collecting weather and rainfall details in January 1938 so is now in his 63rd year of keeping records.

Laurie is proud of his Irish ancestry and over the years has done a lot of research into the Hession family history. Laurie had this to say - "in 1972 I started an interest in family history, this is similar to having a virus; once you're stricken, there is no known cure, 28 years later I am still afflicted."

All these family files are stored in a book cabinet along with several files and scrapbooks that contain photographs, newspaper articles, etc. on the history of Box Hill, Nelson, Rouse Hill, Riverstone and the Hawkesbury district. It is an incredible collection and something he can be very proud of. He is also an avid collector of stamps and coins.

Laurie was an original member of the Riverstone and District Historical Society when it formed in 1980 and has been an active member since.

For all his efforts to the community Laurie was rewarded at the 1986 Orange Blossom Festival with a Community Service Award. On Australia Day 2000 he was again honoured with the Shire Community Service Award. In 1994 he was awarded a Certificate to commemorate 54 years of service to the Box Hill - Nelson Bush Fire Brigade and the year 2000 brought up his 60 years of service. In 2003 a portrait of Laurie, painted by Judith O'Conal, was hung in the Baulkham Hills Council Administration building, as part of a project to capture community icons on canvas.

In the years ahead residents of the district will be deeply indebted to Laurie Hession for his community involvement and his recording of the district's history.